

Mystery Surrounds Death of Russian Helicopter Deserter

By [AFP](#)

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Maksym Kuzminov (R) with Ukrainian military intelligence officer Artem Shevchenko (L) during a press conference at the Ukraine Media Center, September 2023. gur.gov.ua

The death of a Russian pilot who defected to Ukraine with a military helicopter was shrouded in mystery Tuesday, with Spanish authorities refusing to say if a bullet-riddled body found was his.

Maxim Kuzminov flew his Mi-8 helicopter into Ukraine in August in a brazen operation, saying he opposed Russia's military offensive.

Ukraine's GUR military intelligence agency released a video in September in which Kuzminov said he flew from an air base in Russia's Kursk region to Ukraine at an "extremely low altitude, in radio silence mode" to avoid detection.

A GUR spokesman confirmed to AFP on Tuesday that Kuzminov had died without providing

details.

But Spanish media, citing sources close to the investigation, have since Monday reported that the body of a man found riddled with bullets in the southeastern coastal town of Villajoyosa near Alicante last Tuesday was that of the defector.

The reports have not been confirmed by Spanish authorities.

A judicial source told AFP that the body found at the entrance to a residential complex had identity papers which corresponded to a 33-year-old Ukrainian.

'Score-settling'

Spanish police had initially been investigating the crime as a case of "score-settling" in the area, which has a large Russian community, the source added.

Authorities later located the man's burned-out car in a nearby town, which his killers are suspected of having used to flee the scene, according to Spanish media reports.

Russia has repeatedly rejected accusations of assassination or attempted assassination of Kremlin opponents or defectors, both inside and outside its borders.

Spain's Guardia Civil police force which is in charge of the probe told AFP that the identity of the man who was found murdered could be false "and it could be another individual." The force was in the process of verifying the man's identity.

Asked about the case at a press conference following a weekly cabinet meeting, government spokeswoman Pilar Alegria urged the press to let police "do their work so the investigation can advance."

'Matter of time'

Kuzminov, who served in the 319th separate helicopter regiment based in Russia's Far East Primorye region, said in August he had secretly organized his defection for months with the Ukrainian intelligence services and called on other Russian servicemen to do the same.

Two fellow servicemen on the helicopter were not aware of his plans and were killed when they tried to flee after it landed in Ukraine, according to GUR.

Moscow celebrated the news that Kuzminov had died.

"This traitor and criminal became a moral corpse at the very moment when he planned his dirty and terrible crime," Russian state news agencies quoted Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russia's SVR foreign intelligence service, as saying on Tuesday.

He did not confirm or deny any Russian involvement in the former pilot's death.

In October, Russian state TV reported that Russia's GRU intelligence agency had "been given the order" to eliminate Kuzminov.

"It's just a matter of time," a journalist for Russia's Perviy Kanal said in a TV report after talking to Russian special forces, who claimed to be on the hunt for the "traitor."

The Kremlin said on Tuesday it did not have any information on Kuzminov's death.

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